

BRIDGET ANN BAKER



Bridget Baker

Clive Kellner

Simple truths and narratives are reflected in the work of Bridget Baker, and while exploring the trifling neuroses of everyday life, she scrapes the surface of things reaching for the common bond that ties families together. Combining reality and fiction, which has become her leitmotif, Baker conveys an obsessive approach to autobiography. At the age of five, Baker's father died from a heart attack leaving her with the only tangible memory of him—a photograph.

In *So It Goes*, 1996, a vague image of Baker as a child, harnessed in a red Bentley Belt and swimming with her father, lurks out from the tiny circular tin of a Vick's VapoRub container. As an act of remembering and survival, the artist "commemorates" memories of her father by objectifying her portrayal of him. Where Baker crocheted the neck of the Bentley Belt closed and added the embroidered words "Bridget (5) Swimming Without Dad," the artist's evocation of her father is preserved by the action of sealing the swimming apparatus. Similarly, a series of kickboards used for children's swim training have school merit certificates stitched into their surfaces to mark the artist's progression in life.

In *General Excellence Certificate*, 1997, the name of Bridget's high school in East London Clarendon, and the signature of the principal bare testimony to the vestiges of colonial legacy in Africa. An amalgamation of "official" documents pertaining to her schooling—remembrance and reconstruction of family memories and bereavement attributed to early childhood experiences—the artist has mapped her identity based on a variety of materials and influences linked to her personal history, creating a memoir of her life to date. Given the obsessive or repetitive gestures implied in sewing, stitching, and laboring, the artist's approaches to creating are inherently "feminine," offering more positivistic notions of traditional female tasks aligned to crafts. This reversal of representation of the feminine by conventional male-orientated readings can be compared to the works of artists such as

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Winter Project. (detail)
By Bridget Baker, 1999.
Ten hand-knitted woolen jerseys,
foam, 10 wooden trays.
Installation: 62 x 541 x 50 cm.



Fig. 24
LEFT: *Wedding - (my mother's 2nd wedding ceremony - 1977: Anglican Church, Hermanus).*
By Bridget Baker, 1997.

Fig. 25
RIGHT: *Water Baptism - (1985: Christian Centre, Beacon Bay, East London).*
By Bridget Baker, 1997.

Sophie Calle, Annette Messager and Tracey Emin, albeit from a uniquely varied viewpoint. By comparison, Baker's process has also led to personal portrayals related to memory, archiving of objects, and questions around lived experience, which can also be found in the other artists. Similarly, Baker has invested and indeed derives meaning from the materials used in the creation of her installations and objects. Wool, ointments, discarded objects, and trophies are materials that inherently possess meaning, where smells evoke jarring recollections in the viewers own responses.

Suburbia—that constant nightmare of “middle-class,” and more especially in South Africa, white middle-class is sternly reflected in the objects and materials that Baker so seemingly effortlessly disrupts. Attributed as much to lifestyle as to economic status, Baker's world, and that of the majority of the white population, was orientated around suburban life. As much as the artist's work resembles the values and morals implied by the middle class, it also poignantly reflects the anxiety underpinning that particular sector of the South African population. Competitiveness at school, religious dogmatism, family conservatism, and the obscured segregation of apartheid are only some of the symptoms of middle-class values. Identified by the lifestyle attributed to swimming pools, security fences, and associated privileges, Baker's personal chronicles do not pretend to represent anything beyond their own reality and history. Such honesty is refreshing amongst the myriad of artworks that claim political representation. Baker's production is not naïve nor unconcerned with social realities, rather her work represents the miraculous transition from the apartheid state to that of a democracy. Baker grew up in South Africa at a time when the political emergencies inherent to the unfolding drama of history were already taking place. And so it is that Baker, like many of her contemporaries, reflects a new moment and possibilities for the next generation not beholden to overtly political imagery. The post-apartheid state offers a unique opportunity for a new generation of “younger” artists to locate their production within a wider paradigm not predicated on racial and political imagery. It is an arduous task for the framing of discourse within South Africa, which is imbued with an intense racial fragmentation, and by necessity requires that artists reflect this political orientation in their work. Resistance art is a term that was used to capture a particular moment in South Africa's turbulent political history and defined cultural production by artists that opposed apartheid. However, given

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the transition from an autocratic state to one of a democracy, many artists experienced a sense of dislocation. Up until the early 1990s apartheid had remained a constant reference, whereas the shift to a post-apartheid state had contributed to a new climate of reconciliation and transparency, and eventually a wide open field of references enhanced by a new international interest. It is in this current context that artists like Bridget Baker position themselves.

In a review of the artist's first solo exhibition, *The Shrill Sound of a Telephone at 3am*, 1996, Baker's works were described as "hovering poignantly between craft and art, commemoration and gift, quest and obituary." Other than the overtly Calvinist iconography—labor, sacrifice, and the search for the eternal—Baker has the uncanny ability to master complex codes that entrap the viewer in a visual sophistry where objects represent a series of narrative possibilities, each with a fractured memory of their own.

Sweaters displayed openly on shelves are haunting responses to child abuse, abduction, and torture. An identification parade archived. But the artist is playing a game with us—are these vestiges of a cruel crime? Are they again related to a personal hybrid the artist has reinvented through friends and family—a testament once again to her lived experience? The viewer is seduced into a coded portrayal that the artist has knitted together, comprised from jerseys that were borrowed from friends and family, unraveled and reconstituted.

Clive Kellner: Your work draws strongly on childhood experiences and especially on the memories you have of your father who died while you were still very young. One photograph remains linking you to your memory of him. Does the process of creating artworks replace the loss you experienced?

Bridget Baker: The process of making artworks seems to help me experience loss. You see, I don't actually remember much of my childhood. This is an extraordinary statement, but it is this absence of memory that is probably the driving force behind my making art, and often dictates the themes I choose.

I have no first-hand memories of my father when he was alive. What knowledge I have of him is factual, dug-up, researched, or re-told—but physically he never existed for me. I was five when he died, and we children weren't allowed to attend the funeral. It was as if he had vanished. My mother never spoke about him, and we respectfully didn't inquire about him.



Fig. 26
LEFT: *Graduation Ceremony - (receiving a BAFA degree - 1993: University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch).*
By Bridget Baker, 1997.

Fig. 27
ABOVE: *Christening - (1971: Anglican Church, East London).*
By Bridget Baker, 1997.

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We broke with family traditions like having Sunday lunch with next-door neighbors, and my mother escaped into Christian never-never land, taking us with her. So in a sense, one day we had a father, and the next we had a substitute: a heavenly father. The past became a "no-go" zone. A way of coping with "forgetting" was by reading obscure goal-oriented verses from the bible: "Forget what lies behind and move on to the prize."

Our stepfather, a minister of religion, became the "chosen one" in this monstrously idyllic family setup. We children had to impress him in order to placate my mother and be acknowledged by our heavenly father. With very few secular involvements as a family we became solely exposed to Christian dogma (with distinct charismatic and Victorian overtones). Having no other reference points I presumed that these codes of living were normal and healthy.

When I left home naturally I severed connections to repressive Christian notions—I studied, made art, and traveled. The real turning point came in 1995, when I became more politically aware and involved in a reconciliation process with my own history. This process involved revisiting my past—picking up the issues that, as a child, I was not allowed to deal with, which included experiencing grief for the death of my father. Through the process of artmaking, I could visit my father's funeral in my mind. I was free to imagine myself swimming with him. These "visits" offered me a way into and through the grief.

Even in my artmaking process now I always seem to work with memory as a major component. The reason for this is that I am trying not to forget those things that I do remember. I also want to remember those things I have been told. I don't want the recollections I do possess to disappear, no matter how distorted they might be from the original experience.

CK: There is a sense of autobiography throughout your work that maps a seemingly chronological development of your upbringing from images of yourself as a baby through your school years, and finally adulthood. Are there particularly strong feminist elements in your work or thinking?

BB: Domestic occupations like sewing and knitting are historically the terrains of the virtuous woman. My own mother instilled in her young daughters' minds the virtues of handcraft by encouraging us to make our own clothes. At art school I experimented with traditional "fine art" techniques, but remained drawn to approaches like hand-embroidery.



Fig. 28
Bridget Baker - B.A.F.A. (Stell.),
B.A. Hons. (FA) (Stell.), M.F.A.
(UCT) cand.
By Bridget Baker, 1996-7.
Porta-pool. 17 embroidered
kickboards, plastic, cotton, valves.
15 x 35 x 30 cm.

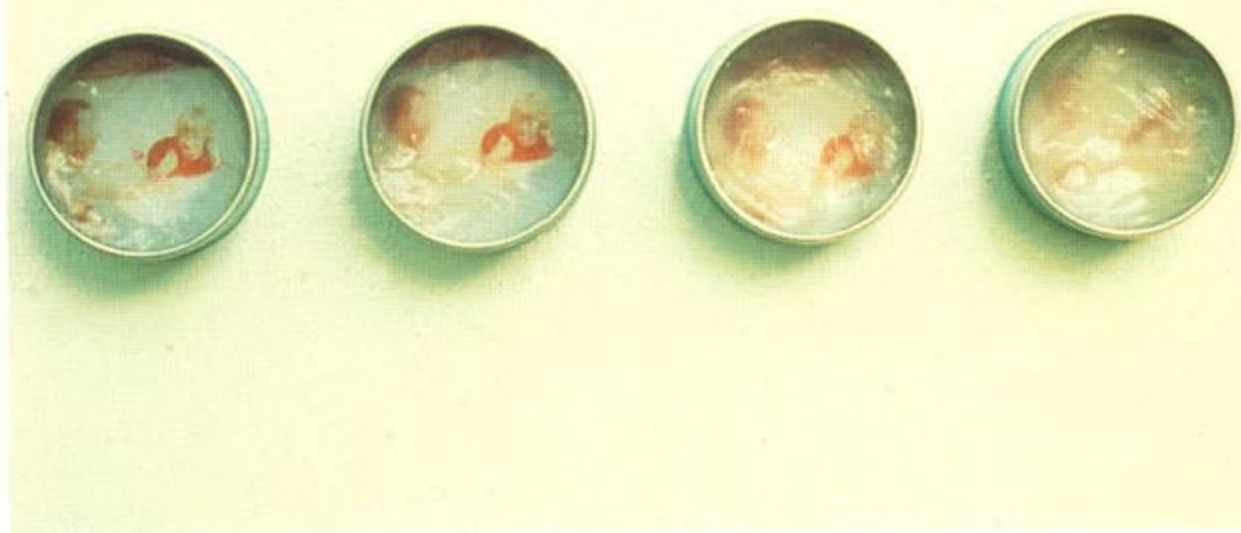


Fig. 29
So It Goes. By Bridget Baker,
1996. Vicks vapor rub, four tins,
photographs.
3.5 cm diam. x 2cm each tin.



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Stitch. (detail)
By Bridget Baker, 1998-99.

This is a time-consuming process and the repetitive nature of the work allows me to contemplate and work through issues I am dealing with.

CK: Given your upbringing in "white" suburban South Africa and the relatively privileged position that is implied by "white" suburbia during the apartheid period, do you think that it is now possible to speak of post-apartheid, and more compelling, of art that is not overtly political?

BB: I was brought up materially privileged. I was also brought up *unaware* of the dire inhumane situation happening in the country. The type of work I made until the end of 1993 manifested a personal unawareness. I was never consciously aware of the reasons for my making art. This dulled vision began to clear in 1995—a significant period in South Africa's political history because the Truth and Reconciliation hearings had just begun and everyone was talking about "finding a common ground." I became involved with a religious action group of students. We would relay stories about our diverse upbringings. This sparked in me an understanding of the commonality of existential human experiences such as loss, mortality, and grief. By hearing others speak about their loss I became aware of my own sense of loss. Consequently, these experiences significantly impacted my artmaking process. My reasons for making art became clearer on a personal level.

CK: You use a variety of "smells" that are representative of childhood remedies for ailments, such as Vick's, Deep Heat, and other medical ointments used to soothe and heal, please expand.

BB: Smell is an immediate and compelling means of triggering memory, perhaps more powerful than visual images in terms of unlocking memory. It evokes a response without any conscious effort or intellectual understanding. Used as an element in the work *Stitch*, Deep Heat muscle rub evokes different responses linked to memories about soothing sore muscles. Artworks that contain an element of smell are often haunting, evoking a persistent presence that continues outside of its immediate physical environment.

CK: Referring to an article by Andrew Putter, to what extent do you agree with him that your works "hover poignantly between craft and art, commemoration and gift, quest and obituary"?

BB: This refers to the paradox at the heart of most of my work and thinking: wanting to be separate from my childhood, and wanting to reconstruct memories. Motivated by such inconsistent emotions I constantly revisit sites of my childhood in order to remember and at the same time abandon them.

CK: Do you suppose that the conventions of high art categories such as fine art and craft are rendered obsolete in a post-apartheid state where the empowerment of women, hand-made objects, and tradition are being so stridently revisited?

BB: I have all but discarded the false superiority of European "fine art" traditions that we were taught at art school. I regard that legacy as redundant. I feel more at ease following the craft traditions of my childhood. I consider these as more honest—not lowly—forms of expression. Now that the boundaries between categories such as "fine art" and "craft" are disappearing there are very few restraints when it comes to artmaking. Also, artists need not go to art shops ever again. We have the freedom to use any material. In contemporary artmaking the materials perform an essential conceptual role because of their own innate history. The issues I discuss in my work are usually of a domestic nature, so it makes sense for me to use mostly household materials.

CK: Colonialism brought a vast legacy to the African continent, it also brought Western cultural traditions and methodologies to South Africa. Do you think the majority of artists in South Africa work within a Eurocentric framework: painting, installation, and video for example?

Fig. 30
Not A Life Preserver.
By Bridget Baker, 1995.
Bently belt, cotton thread.
Diam. 35 cm.



BB: Weaving, knitting, sewing—the primary mediums I work with—are neither specifically European nor African traditions. It is quite apparent that my influences come both from Europe and from Africa—my heritage and my experience—in roughly equal proportions.

The desire to create installations comes from an impulse to surround the viewer, to draw them into the work by creating an environment which is all encompassing. I am not concerned whether this is a European or an African impulse. I remember very clearly going for supper in a shack in an informal settlement outside Stellenbosch, and having a sense that I was somehow in an installation. The rusted, unlivable exterior opened to reveal an immaculate and spectacularly decorated interior. Out of financial necessity, found objects had been used with incredible resourcefulness and ingenuity. I remember being acutely aware of the artistic richness of the shack, getting the sense of being surrounded by someone else's materials, chosen and selected from their lives. The aesthetic was so complete and coherent and so different from my own. Since then I've wanted to make installations.

CK: There is so much talk of the global and local today, what sort of changes do you think have occurred during South Africa's transition period toward becoming a democracy? Are we finally a part of the world? Is internationalism important? How does a "young" artist survive in the "new" South Africa?

BB: If I compare my mother's generation to my own, I'm struck by the humbleness of my condition. It seems that there was once a lot more money (inheritance and legacy). I don't think my mother ever had to *look* for anything—any material object—be it furniture, paintings, television, car, clothes, these just came to her. By contrast, I live on the bones of my bottom—art grants are impossible to come by, corporate sponsorship goes mainly to sports—it's not at all conducive to making art, especially not for a white, "historically privileged" artist. So I eke out a living from hand to mouth, constantly in debt. But what that does is it forces me to be resourceful. Like the woman who had decorated her shack with packaging paper, I am forced to take what I can from the environment. I cannot afford elaborately expensive art materials. I must take what is beautiful, poetic, resonating from the abundance of "stuff" that surrounds my life. I most often use found materials—things I can get for free—to make art. I

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use letters, certificates, old jerseys, the "leftovers." In this way I am thrust into my environment. My work becomes African by virtue of it being made of African junk.

CK: Are we finally part of the world?

BB: Yes. Curators from around the world are very impressed when they come here. But there's a sense that it's the curators in the Northern Hemisphere who decide that we're part of the world. We're "allowed into the fold." We still live with a complex that we aren't good enough, unless we are told that we're good enough. There is a lack of confidence in our product. Until we decide to allow ourselves to be part of the world, we live constantly in opposition to the idea of the world, and thus still isolated.